

Florence Louise Atkinson Criley

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Florence Louise Atkinson Criley struggled for equal rights for all minorities not just for women but for everyone. Criley was born in 1915 in Barberton, Ohio, during a time when many immigrants were entering the United States. She started with a rough childhood, having to work while in high school to support her family. In the process she had a good start on understanding jobs. She joined and helped a few unions, first helping factory workers get equality and then helping women and other minorities get their equality as well. Criley also created a union to help all women stand up for themselves. All her hard work led to her having the night of Women's day dedicated to her.

Working in different jobs such as a singer, waitress, social worker, and working on an assembly line, Florence Criley learned how important a labor movement is for workers. While working at all these jobs she set up a sit down strike in Barberton, Ohio. Then she moved to San Francisco with her whole family of 13 siblings and her mother. There she joined the International Long Shore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) as their manager then became their director. Later during the First World War some of the trade unions went on strike. When Florence wanted to join, the union did not allow her. She tried to keep peace with the pro-strikers but they began to be abusive. Therefore, she joined the strike and was fired from her post in the union. Later was hired as director in the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) where she stayed for 30 years.

Criley's time in the ILWU was all right, but she did not feel very comfortable

with its rules. When she joined the (UE) she still had problems. In Illinois, she was in charge of buildings that stood in the far south side of Chicago. The workers were all men and said that they did not want a woman as their superior and gave her a six-month trial period to prove herself worthy. The workers began to trust her as their manager. She became the top UE specialist in forging hammer shops and a role model for many other women.

When the Cold War started it really slowed down the growth of labor unions. The anticommunists wanted to break the labor unions. The Taft–Hartley Act really weakened the UE. Other unions raided their shops and the international UE decided to break down the unions in New York and Massachusetts.

The International UE started employing as many women workers as possible. Criley traveled all over the Mid-Atlantic to support the union elections. In this election the UE and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL- CIO) went against each other and both became weak. The UE made Criley their field organizer and help lead the organizing effort at Bell and Howell.

After this Criley left the UE and became a shop worker at the Chicago Transformer until 1951 when she rejoined the UE as field organizer again. She unionized many shops and went to all union related meetings. She became the first woman in the position of the International Representative for the UE. She then helped other small unions to keep from going under; helped them form discipline in negotiations to keep them from having a brutal fight. To make this happen she needed the support of African Americans and she went to their churches, gave speeches of UE devotion, and handed out fliers. Even with all the effort Criley put in, the GHR Iron Foundry union went down and

now one union needed to control their foundry. The government supported the AFL-CIO, and the AFL-CIO's leaders hated the UE. In the end Criley received the GHR foundry.

After helping all these unions Criley also stopped two raids from happening in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. She and her husband joined committees for Protection of the Foreign born and many others for the equality of minorities. Since they joined these unions, the government watched them. Also her husband became unemployed because the government put him on the Black List. Later Criley joined the Feminist Movement. She wanted to help women get equal rights but she did not want to break male unions even if they were prejudiced towards female unions. She then became an important agent in the making of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW). The CLUW set goals they wanted to accomplish through this union. These were (1) to help over worked employees; (2) to gain equal rights for women, and (3) to make the union women more active in legislation.

More than 3,000 women attended first CLUW meeting. Criley became the leader of the Chicago chapter and died as their treasurer. Criley died of a heart attack and arthritis. Her service was held in Automobile Mechanics Hall in Chicago on June 6, 1976. This woman worked very hard from the start of her life, joining unions, helping minorities get equal rights, and building a union to help women especially get their equal rights. Women like her played an important role in helping women receive the rights they deserve. Many of these women are forgotten or never told about. It is our job to have them remembered. Naming the night of Women's Day to Florence Criley is a great way to honor her accomplishments. [From Lunin Schultz, *Women Building Chicago*,

1790-1990.]